

The Book of Acts - Chapter Twenty Three

IX [Acts 21:17-23:35 - The Arrest in Jerusalem \(continues/concludes\)](#)

IX.e [Acts 22:30-23:11 - Paul before the Sanhedrin \(continues/concludes\)](#)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin by the Roman commander Lysias, in the hope that he would have this matter resolved to the satisfaction of all. Paul boldly and confidently stated his innocence and clear conscience of all the matters they had raised against him. This apparently angered the high priest Ananias, who ordered Paul to be struck in the face, contrary to Jewish law. Paul challenged him over his actions and then showed some contrition toward the office rather than the man, for the sake of appeasing the Sanhedrin.

Knowing that the Sanhedrin was a mix of Sadducees and Pharisees, and that the former did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, then Paul, a Pharisee himself, let it be known that the main charge against him was his proclamation of the resurrection. This was a viewpoint strongly held by all Pharisees and a fierce debate then erupted between the two groups, with the entire Sanhedrin in uproar. Fearing for Paul's safety, the Roman commander had him extracted and taken back to the fortress.

More than forty zealous Jews then sought permission of the chief priests and elders to assassinate Paul. Part of the plan was to get the leaders to request Paul's further appearance before them, and the forty or so men would kill him as he was brought out of the prison. Paul's nephew heard of the plot, went to the prison and told Paul, who instructed his nephew to tell the commander as well.

On hearing of the plot, the commander wrote a letter to Governor Felix in Cæsarea, and instructed a large force of his men to take Paul to the Governor that very night, where he would be safe from the mob that planned his death, and as a way of ridding himself of the problem. Paul was taken to Cæsarea under strong military guard, handed over to the Governor, who bound him over in Herod's palace, where he was to await trial before Felix.

IX.e.i [Acts 23:1-11 - Paul's Second Defence](#)

¹ Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."

Acts 23:1

Having faithfully fulfilled his duty to God, both as a Pharisee and as a follower of Jesus, Paul stood before them with a clear conscience, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it: <<Pray for

us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way>> (Hebrews 13:18).

² At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

Acts 23:2

The high priest instructed his attendants to strike Paul on the mouth, just as they had done to Jesus: <<When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded>> (John 18:22), which had been prophesied by Micah: <<They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod>> (Micah 5:1b). Paul had stood boldly and fearlessly before them as an innocent man would, and had spoken to them respectfully but informally. Something in this clearly upset the high priest for him to order Paul to be struck, perhaps it was his protestation of innocence, or the fact he addressed the assembly directly and not through him as president, but we cannot be sure of his real motivation. Perhaps he had already decided Paul's guilt. It was something that was also seen in the OT where someone spoke in wisdom or truth that caused offence, such as when King Ahab's prophet Zedekiah struck the true prophet Micaiah for correctly prophesying Ahab's defeat and death in battle: <<Then Zedekiah son of Kenaanah went up and slapped Micaiah in the face. "Which way did the spirit from the Lord go when he went from me to speak to you?" he asked>> (1 Kings 22:24), and when the priest Pashur struck Jeremiah for prophesying the imminent destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians: <<he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord's temple>> (Jeremiah 20:2). Such is the treatment for those who speak confidently and truthfully in the name of the Lord. Whereas the love of Jesus is more likely to produce the response: <<Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine>> (Song 1:2), for those who receive blows to their mouths for his name's sake; for Solomon wrote: <<An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips>> (Proverbs 24:26), but in truth the opposite is most likely, as seen here in the Sanhedrin. The law clearly stated: <<If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves>> (Deuteronomy 25:2), thus Paul would first have to be charged with a crime and found guilty before the high priest, as judge of the assembly, is permitted to have him beaten. The high priest was guilty of transgressing the very law he was there to uphold. The high priest's actions could be described with King Solomon's words: <<And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgement—wickedness was there, in the place of justice – wickedness was there>> (Ecclesiastes 3:16), and then goes on to say: <<I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgement both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed">> (Ecclesiastes 3:17).

Ananias was a particularly bad high priest. The illegality of Ananias' action is understood from Leviticus 19:15 <<Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly>>.

Ananias ben Nebedeus, or son of Nebedeus, officiated as high priest from about AD47 to AD59. Quadratus, a governor of Syria, accused him of being responsible for acts of violence. He was sent to Rome for trial in AD52, but was acquitted by the emperor Claudius. Being a friend of the Romans, he was murdered by the people at the beginning of the First Jewish-Roman War, circa AD67.

³ Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Acts 23:3

Paul, like Jesus, used the metaphor of whitewash for hypocrisy, not out of spite or revenge for the insult against him, but more in the Spirit, to let the High Priest know he had abused the power that God had bestowed upon his office. It was not in the vein of: <<Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean>> (Matthew 23:27), but more in line with the mud and rubble a wall was constructed with and then decorated to make it look good.

⁴ Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?"

⁵ Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realise that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

Acts 23:4-5

You dare to insult God's high priest? Paul does not apologise for his remarks, even though they have caused offence but he does recognise it as a stumbling block for the Jews, particularly if some of them had an interest in coming to faith, to have God's high priest insulted in front to the Sanhedrin. Paul's excuse that he did not know he was speaking to the high priest and his quote from scripture, acknowledging his error, may have appeased his audience. It is quite possible that Paul did not know the high priest, since he had been absent from Jerusalem for many years, but it was a weak argument for a man of his position. However, if he were speaking prophetically through the Spirit, then like the OT prophets and like Jesus himself, he was at liberty to speak to kings and rulers in the manner that God saw fit at the time, and there is no need to apologise for speaking God's words against people.

That does not give us licence to speak harsh words to fellow believers, or anyone else, and claim it is being given prophetically. Such NT prophecy should be shared with church leaders first, to allow them to determine how it should be handled.

⁶ Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."

⁷ When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)

Acts 23:6-8

The Pharisees believed in angels and spirits and in a future resurrection of the dead, although those who were not believers did not accept Jesus' resurrection; the Sadducees rejected the very idea of a resurrection as well as belief in angels and spirits. Consistent with this, the Pharisees granted that <<a spirit or angel>> might have visited Paul (v.9), while the Sadducees rejected this possibility altogether.

The Sadducees rejected the extra-biblical traditions of the Pharisees, perhaps embracing only the Pentateuch as canonical. This narrow canon may explain why they did not believe in the general resurrection of the dead, since it is not explicitly mentioned in the Pentateuch. Perhaps for the same reason, they embraced human responsibility, which is emphasised in the Law of Moses.

The Pharisees resided primarily in Jerusalem and were divided into at least three schools: the disciples of Shammai, Hillel, and Gamaliel. These schools were especially concerned

about the proper administration of the temple. These three schools attempted to shape the religious life of the ordinary Jew through the dissemination of their traditions. The Pharisees also had considerable influence over local scribes, who would preach in the synagogue according to their interpretations. The Pharisaic tradition was pragmatic and relevant to the needs of the time.

⁹ There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" ¹⁰ The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

Acts 23:9-10

We see that Paul used his position as a Pharisee and the beliefs they held about the resurrection, and those of the Sadducees who did not, to set the Sanhedrin in uproar over the issues that he proclaimed was at the centre of the Gospel message, and the very reason he was before them.

Paul had to be delivered out of harm's way in the tumult that followed. Within less than 24 hours he had been saved from harm, and probably death, twice by the Romans, and once from a beating by the Romans because of his Roman citizenship. But in truth, it is always God who delivers us from such harm, as Paul himself acknowledged: <<You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them>> (2 Timothy 3:10-11). Now a 4th attempt would be made to harm him but Jesus was ahead of the game: <<Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it>> (Micah 2:1).

Paul's testimony to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem was an especially significant fulfilment of the prophecy about his own ministry: <<But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel>> (Acts 9:15).

Luke's two books provide us with a good understanding of the two main Jewish religious groups, i.e. the Pharisees and the Sadducees. During Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees dominate as much of Jesus' teaching opposed their traditions that were actually in competition with, rather than complimentary to, the law, and contradictory to the Gospel.

In Acts, the Sadducees come to the fore, as they had fierce opposition to the apostles' teaching of the resurrection of Jesus. In the main, Sadducees were seen as heretics. They only came to prominence due to the high social background and wealthy families that most of them came from. They acknowledged the books of the law as being a good and moral standard for life, but cared not for the remainder of the OT. They believed that God was made of matter and not spiritual, and that his angels were just created messengers or even figments of people's imagination.

The Sanhedrin could not and would never make a successful prosecution against Paul. In fact, by the time the case came before Nero several years later, the Jews didn't even bother to travel to Rome as there was a new high priest with higher priorities to deal with.

However, the primary reason for their failure was that Paul was innocent of any charges they brought against him. Jesus had been proclaimed innocent too, yet the Sanhedrin had persuaded Pilate to crucify him, thus it was they who were guilty of sin: <<If I had not

done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father>> (John 15:24). Paul was declared innocent by Lysias, yet he sent him to Felix. The next governor Porcius Festus also had nothing to charge him with, found him innocent yet kept him in chains until he could be sent to Rome. Even there he remained in chains and under house arrest for at least a further two years before the Emperor finally heard his case. Paul had previously written of his desire to see Rome: <<I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong>> (Romans 1:11), and: <<So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way>> (Romans 15:28), but it had hoped it would have been under different circumstances.

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Acts 23:11

Jesus confirms Paul will see Rome in a vision to him at night. The very fact of the Lord's closeness to Paul must have given him all the courage he needed. Of course, he is close to each one of us as well: <<God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being'>> (Acts 17:27-28a), so we too can take courage in that.

A common misquote that some have applied to the likes of Paul and Peter is 'See Rome and die'. The true quote is 'See Naples and die', and was a phrase coined during the reign of the Bourbons of Naples, considered by historians to have been the city's Golden Age.

IX.f Acts 23:12-22 - The plot to kill Paul

Paul's nephew informed the tribune of a plot by forty or so zealous Jews to kill him, which allowed the commander to make arrangements to move Paul away from Jerusalem and place him under the direct jurisdiction of Governor Felix in Caesarea.

¹² The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ More than forty men were involved in this plot. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul.

Acts 23:12-14

Bound themselves with an oath. Being bound to an oath was not something a Jew would take lightly as to break that oath was to dishonour God: <<When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said>> (Numbers 30:2). Because of a foolish vow Jephthah made under that law, that he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his door when he returned home if God would let him have victory over the King of Ammon, cost the life of his only daughter: <<When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break">> (Judges 11:35).

More than forty men. In anguish the prophet cried out: <<See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her — but now murderers!>> (Isaiah 1:21). Thus it was easy to find forty Jews so willing to take Paul's life under a vow to God.

The chief priests and elders were the dominant force on the Sanhedrin, and the majority of these were Sadducees, who were the ones most opposed to Paul. The conspirators do not seem to have approached the Pharisees.

¹⁵ Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

¹⁶ But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

Acts 23:15-16

The son of Paul's sister. Nothing is known of Paul's family. They possibly moved to Jerusalem when Paul was young but more likely it was when he was a young man and was given the privilege to learn under Gamaliel, see comments on Acts 22:3.

He went into the barracks. As a Roman citizen, Paul was probably given extra privileges such as relatively free access rights for visitors.

¹⁷ Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

Acts 23:17-18

It is often said if you want a secret made public then tell someone in church. Thus the plot came to the attention of Paul's nephew, who told Paul and then the Roman commander, Lysias. The commander, as did the centurion, showed great respect to both Paul and his nephew and acted promptly on their word.

¹⁹ The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

Acts 23:19

Took the young man by the hand. It would be quite daunting for a young Jew to find himself before the Roman commander but this gesture would help to calm his anxieties.

²⁰ He said: "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. ²¹ Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request."

Acts 23:20-21

Since the plot was thwarted, one wonders if the conspirators died of hunger and thirst! Probably not, although it might have added a sense of justice to the story. Under rabbinic law, in the event that a vow became impossible to fulfil, those under it were released from its terms (Mishnah, Nedarim 3.3).

²² The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

Acts 23:22

The commander, knowing the value of confidentiality in such matters, made Paul's nephew keep his visit secret, so that the commander could plan Paul's safe evacuation without fear of it being thwarted, or of a disturbance being caused in the city.

IX.g Acts 23:23-35 - Paul transferred to Cæsarea

To protect Paul, Lysias the tribune sent him under cover of night and heavy guard to the governor in Cæsarea. However, their travel at night would also make the journey more comfortable, compared with the high daytime temperatures as this was summer.

²³ Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Cæsarea at nine tonight. ²⁴ Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

Acts 23:23-24

The entire Roman force in Jerusalem consisted of a single cohort of up to 1,000 soldiers. The importance that Lysias attached to his prisoner is evidenced by his sending approximately half the force to protect him. Paul, because of his trust in God, would never have asked for such an escort, for the same reasons that Ezra did not ask King Artaxerxes: <<I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him">> (Ezra 8:22), and he would become almost proud of his chains: <<As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ>> (Philippians 1:13), the palace here almost certainly refers to Herod's Palace in Cæsarea, see v.25.

Provide mounts for Paul. Some commentators believe the text indicates Paul was provided with horses in order that his friends could accompany him but this seems unlikely given the secrecy Lysias wished to maintain, and the haste with which he arranged Paul's extraction from the city. The extra horses were probably spare mounts for Paul to change to during the long and hot journey. It reinforces the high esteem the commander now held for his prisoner.

Felix was governor of Judæa between AD52-59. He was somewhat inept, dishonest and had his share of weaknesses, e.g. <<Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison>> (Acts 24:24-27).

²⁵ He wrote a letter as follows:

²⁶ Claudius Lysias,

To His Excellency, Governor Felix:

Greetings.

Acts 23:25-26

Lysias' letter follows standard Greek form: sender (Lysias), to recipient (Felix), followed by greetings (Greek chairein). He gave Felix the deferential title Excellency (Greek kratistos).

²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen.

²⁸ I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. ²⁹ I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.

³⁰ When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

Acts 23:27-30

Lysias sent a full account to Felix in a letter, in which he called Felix most excellent, the same title Luke had given to Theophilus in his Gospel introduction. Although the letter was mostly factual, he did modify the sequence of when it became known to him that Paul was a Roman citizen, making it appear the reason for his rescue rather than arrest. This would raise his own personal profile with the governor.

Lysias had no charges to list, other than that all complaints against Paul had to do with 'their law' (v.29), and not Roman law. Throughout the rest of Acts, all the Roman officials testify to Paul's innocence of any charges against him.

In the letter, Lysias writes that Paul has done nothing that deserved death or imprisonment. He could have simply released Paul but perhaps that may have brought further riots or trouble for him, and so he sent Paul to Felix, allowing him to judge the case for himself. Paul was sent to Cæsarea, the seat of Roman government in Judæa, with a strong escort of cavalry and heavily armed troops, although just one angel could have defeated them had it been God's will to free Paul. We see the commander's actions as human will but in fact it was simply fulfilling the will of God.

I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case. Although written in the past tense, Lysias would have issued this instruction probably the following day after Paul's departure.

³¹ So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris.

Acts 23:31

During the night. Although the NIV states <<at nine tonight>> in v.23, some translations specify the 3rd hour of the night, which could either be 21:00 or three hours after sunset, it was close to mid-summer as Paul was there for Pentecost, and thus the army could march through the cool of the night. Other commentators believe it was the third watch of the night, about 03:00 and therefore they would have the full benefit of daylight ahead of them, but this seem less likely than the first option.

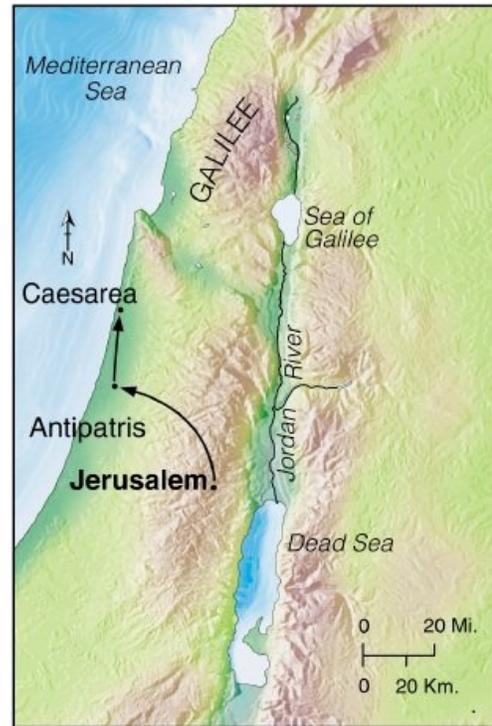
Antipatris was 35 of the 62 miles by road from Jerusalem to Cæsarea (v.33), a difficult but not impossible distance for soldiers to march in the cool of the night. Only the 70 cavalry (v.32) continued to Cæsarea. Antipatris, ancient Aphek in Sharon, is identified with Tell Ras el-Ain, and was rebuilt under Herod the Great in the 1st Century BC. It was renamed after his father, Antipater. Herodian-era shops, pavement, Roman coins, and a fortress have been uncovered in excavations at Aphek.

The image shows the location of Antipatris in relation to both Jerusalem and Cæsarea.

³² The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. ³³ When the cavalry arrived in Cæsarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. ³⁴ The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia,

Acts 23:32-34

Handed Paul over. Paul was brought before a ruler and would also face kings to witness for the Christ, just as Jesus had said: <<You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them>> (Mark 13:9).



At this time Judæa and Cilicia were both part of the Roman province of Syria. Since Felix administered a portion of that province and Paul's home was within it, Felix determined that Paul's case was within his jurisdiction.

³⁵ he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

Acts 23:35

The image shows Herod's palace in Cæsarea, which was also called a prætorium. It was built by Herod the Great, who had a reputation for building some magnificent structures all around the eastern Mediterranean Sea countries, and it served as the quarters of the Roman governor. Cæsarea was the seat of Roman government for the whole region and also had its own cohort of Roman soldiers.



Herod's Palace is where Paul stayed. No doubt he had relatively free access to his friends and the courtiers, which was quite common for Roman prisoners of Paul's standing, hence the comments in Philippians 1:13 <<As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ>>.